

# **Communicating European Citizenship**

**London, 22 March 2010**

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### Communicating European Citizenship

22 March 2010

*The EU's communication under the Barroso presidency:  
political strategies and European dilemmas*

*Very first Draft for discussion, do not quote*

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#### **Introduction**

In recent years the European Commission has prioritized the issue of the public sphere construction, promoting measures to stimulate a transnational arena to counter waning popular enthusiasm for the European project. The collapse of the draft Constitutional Treaty after the French and Dutch referenda, and the impasse with the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty after the Irish referendum gave closing the communication gap between the Union and its citizens even more urgency.

In 2005 the Commission proposed a so-called 'period of reflection' on the future of the European project and launched a series of innovative statements and action plans on communication policy, notably the *Action Plan to improve communicating Europe* (CEC 2005a), the *Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate* (CEC 2005d) and the *White Paper on a European Communication Policy* (CEC 2006c). In the view of the Commission 'these initiatives set out a long-term plan to reinvigorate European democracy and help the emergence of a European public sphere, where citizens are given the information and the tools to actively participate in the decision making process and gain ownership of the European project' (CEC 2005d: 2-3).

In the context of the present EU crisis, communication comes to the top of the agenda and its improvement is seen as fundamental. By improving debate and dialogue between institutions and citizens, the Commission is trying to develop a new kind of democratic imagined community in which governing takes place in a dialogic

environment and within a new demos. The Commission's new emphasis on a two-way flow of communication between citizens and institutions is noteworthy. The *White Paper on a European Communication Policy* emphasizes the difference between the old top-down communication strategy based on propaganda and the new transparent and open approach. This is stressed within this document when stating that a 'good two-way communication between the citizens and public institutions is essential in a healthy democracy' (CEC 2006c: 7). This effort to further democracy through increased public participation is considered a promising approach to revive the European project and overcome present difficulties.

These considerations are the background to this paper. I take the idea that the European Commission explicitly recognised the need for meaningful, open and transparent communicative spaces on European issues as my starting point, and discuss the possibilities and pitfalls of such an approach. The main EU documents on public communication show a will to establish better relationships with different typologies of networks (such as Europe Direct, Civil Society Organisations, media). They focus on the development of a strategy based on the interplay between institutional and non institutional actors: all of whom can act as intermediaries between the local and the supranational. Furthermore, at the core of the Commission's new strategy is an understanding of the necessity to find out how to develop the debate on Europe in arenas that have traditionally been excluded from the process of European integration, it is therefore promoting decentralisation in its communication policy (Bee and Bello 2009).

Between 2005 and 2009 the European Commission initiated an impressive series of concrete measures, targeting local audiences. Codes of conduct, guidelines, training courses for journalists and workshops for civil society actors were organised in order to enhance dialogic interactions and to put Europe on the public agenda. Furthermore, the improvement of the *europa.eu* web site and the interactive structures that were set up (for example thematic blogs and fora, the Your-Voice in Europe portal, the CIRCA website *Communication and Information Research Centre Administrator*) aimed to give people a say on political matters concerning the EU, and was an attempt to develop a strategic and comprehensive approach to public communication. All these measures have been subject to public scrutiny and criticism. It is worth noting that civil society organisations and the media have both welcomed and criticised the new communication strategy. In the consultation on the *White Paper*

on a *European Communication Policy*<sup>1</sup> contributors observed that EU strategy is more oriented towards solving the EU's democratic deficit and its subsequent crisis of legitimacy than to creating a model based on the idea that communication is a public service necessary for the fulfilment of citizens' rights to be informed about the 'public'. Overall, civil society organisations highlighted the need to adopt a truly bottom-up approach to the debate on European matters and stressed inclusiveness and openness as basic principles for the enhancement of a democratic public sphere. As a result, the current situation is characterized by very complex communication spaces, in which different actors interact and shape visions of Europe and its present and future challenges.

Under the light of these considerations, I am going to report on some results of a field work I conducted in different Italian regions between 2005 and 2007 with Europe Direct's representatives. Aim of this study, sponsored by the Italian Ministry for Education and Research (MIUR), was to understand the beliefs, ideas and points of criticism in respect to the model of public communication framed by the European Commission in documents such as the *White Paper on a European Communication Policy* (CEC 2006) and the *Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate* (CEC 2005).

### **The theoretical framework: Constructivism and the study of the European Integration**

The expanding process of European Integration, which in the last fifty years has drastically broadened its areas of competences, has included cultural and social aspects which traditionally characterised the national state structure. Such expansion has often been labelled as an identity building process (Checkel 1999), emphasising by this term the institutions' capacity of modifying and shaping the territorial and emotional sense of belonging within a particular area characterized by sharing some features. The overall framework of this paper relies on the whole set of works that have been studying the social construction of Europe in the last few years and which have investigated the development of the European Public Sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> The Commission asked for comments on its White Paper on Communication Policy and received 313 responses from institutions, social actors and the media. Contributions are accessible and available at: <http://circa.europa.eu/Public/irc/press/whitepaper/library>

Hermann and Brewer, in introducing their recent book titled “Becoming European: transnational identities in the EU” (2004), claim that the EU’s role in developing and shaping the process of identification should not be underestimated (Hermann and Brewer 2004). The European Union in fact directly affects people’s life, shaping behaviours and drawing EU institutions ever deeper into the national social contexts. One of the main assumptions of the constructivist theory is that European Identity is shaped by institutions, created and in some ways manipulated (Wiener and Diez 2004).

In 1999 an entire number of the review named “European Public Policy” has been dedicated to presenting constructivism as a new approach in European Studies and to defining it. In presenting such issue of the review Christiansen et al affirm that constructivism can be considered an useful research approach to study the process of European Integration, by stressing the transformative impact it had on people’s identities and attitudes (Christiansen et al 1999).

The emphasis of European Integration as a process which is continuously changing is quite important, because through this assumption we realise that European identity is characterised by being continuously forged and constructed. Europe is something that influences the cognitive schemas and the social representations of people’s life through a never ended process of identity building (Laffan 2004). As an approach, social constructivism has thus put forward new insights to study the complex relation between the EU and its citizens and to interpret the different attempts of the former to develop a new ‘imagined community’ on which the latter can identify with.

On these regards, as Cris Shore (2000: 26) underlines, the EU has developed a system of ‘agents of consciousness’ with the aim of reinventing a European identity. Shore take inspiration by works on the symbolic construction of ethnic and national communities. Symbols reflect the cultural heritage of a particular community, as the socio-anthropological theory has widely argued (Barth 1969; Cohen 1985), is that through symbols one learns ‘how to be social’ in specific contexts. Shore argues that the process leading to the development of the idea of the nation state and the ongoing process of European integration are in many ways similar. In fact, at the European level elites also play a crucial role in determining how the EU’s identity is being constructed (Bee 2008). As this literature has quite efficiently shown, this process started in the eighties, when the EU began to promote itself by developing a set of

policies for a 'Citizens' Europe'. The social imaginary of Europe was to be created through the development of a symbolic reality. The Adonnino Report in 1985 is the starting point (CEC 1985); on its recommendation a wide variety of instruments was created to enable the forging of an imagined Europe and the development of a perception of a homogenous European public space (Shore 2000, Sassatelli 2002).

### **The debate on the European Public Sphere**

The debate on the EPS has recently achieved new prominence in the study of the European integration process and it provides the theoretical framework for this paper. The concept of the public sphere is important as 'a precondition for the realisation of popular sovereignty because, in principle, it entitles everybody to speak without limitations, whether on themes, participation, questions, time or resources' (Eriksen 2004: 1). So, the public sphere enables participation in collective choice, allows for the production, reproduction and transformation of a 'social imaginary' and is a medium of social integration, a form of social solidarity, as well as an arena for debating with others (Calhoun 2003: 1).

Thus, we can say that one of the main features of this social construct is that it is a basilar constitutive element of democracy, based on the guarantee of legal rights, such as those of freedom of expression and association. It is a common space of free discussion where some problems of public concern are revealed and debated and where decisions are actually made. According to the deliberative conception of democracy, political institutions have to take the results of such processes of public deliberation into consideration and channel them into policy making.

Calhoun underlined another important aspect: the public sphere's function as 'a setting for communication and participation in collective action that can shape identities and interests, not only reflect them' (Calhoun 2003: 252). As the contributions of some important constructivist scholars show (Anderson 1991, Deutsch 1953, Gellner 1983), shaping identities within a political arena is fundamental to developing a sense of belonging within a community. For instance, social communication (Deutsch 1953) and education (Gellner 1983) are essential to the forging of national identity – allowing all the people who live in a certain geographical area to imagine themselves as a nation (Anderson 1991).

It follows, therefore, that an important source of alienation is exclusion from a particular political system and its structures; its means of communication, and its cultural, social and educational systems (Calhoun 2003). This has also been discussed by Nancy Fraser, who argues that the concept of the public sphere allows us ‘to study the discursive construction of social problems and social identities. But unlike some other approaches, it situates discursive processes in their social-institutional context. The idea of the public sphere enables us to study the ways in which culture is embedded in social structure and affected by social relations of domination’ (Fraser 1995: 288). In her model, Fraser stresses the necessity of stimulating participation through the elimination of social inequalities, allowing the development of multiple publics – even opponents – and creating space for the inclusion of different interests and issues.

This brief account of the significance of the concept of the public sphere makes its relevance for the European project clearer: the development of transnational spaces of communication would facilitate citizens’ participation in EU processes, would provide valuable inputs to EU governance, foster the emergence of the EU polity and help the politicization of EU issues, allowing minorities a voice in policy making. It is worth underlining that the debate on the development of the European Public Sphere raised at the end of the nineties, parallel to the famous confrontation between Habermas (1995) and Grimm (1995) on the democratic legitimacy of the EU and on the process of constitutionalisation. This debate opened a whole set of research aimed at discovering the patterns of emergence of a transnational public sphere.

Over the years a number of topics have been addressed. Attention has been paid to the normative conceptualisation of the public sphere (Bellamy and Castiglione 2001, Eriksen 2004, Eriksen and Fossum 2002), looking at models of communication spaces on which the EU could rely to improve its democratic governance. Various studies have investigated differences between the national and European models of public sphere from the empirical point of view (Van De Steeg 2002), the Europeanization process in national public spheres (Koopmans and Erbe 2004, Della Porta and Caiani 2006), the definition of civil society actors acting transnationally and making claims on the European structure (Perez Diaz 1998, Ruzza 2004), public attitudes to European integration in different member states (Diez Medrano 2003a), the comparison between different media with an emphasis on the ways in which these report news about European issues (Gleissner and de Vreese 2005, Statham and Gray

2005, Trenz 2005, 2007), political communication (Schlesinger 1999), the EU's information and communication policy (Aldrin and Utard 2008, Bee and Bello 2009, Brüggemann 2005), the role of political journalism in constructing debates about European issues (Gavin 2004).

A central question investigated by various authors regards the relevance and possibility of the existence of a public sphere aimed at developing communication spaces that transcend the structures of the nation state (Bellamy and Castiglione 2001, Calhoun 2003, Eriksen and Fossum 2000, 2002, Schlesinger 1999, 2003). There is widespread consensus on the idea that national, unitary models of EPS cannot simply be transposed to the EU level (Castells 1997, Soysal 2002). Rather, recent conceptualisations have focused on models that stress the existence of differentiated, segmented and constantly changing public spheres that emerge simultaneously at the subnational, national and transnational levels (Eriksen 2004). Here the concept of network plays a central role because it refers to the interaction of the media, social actors and institutions which produce resonance on European issues (Trenz and Eder 2004). Research shows the existence of a multiplicity of communication networks which are linked to each other, superimposed or subdivided according to different European themes (Van de Steeg 2002, Trenz and Eder 2004). The EPS is thus a dynamic, fragmented and differentiated entity in which different actors compete to have their arguments heard and to influence the European system according to different dynamics (Eriksen 2004). Related to this, we can distinguish between a 'strong public sphere' - actors from the European elites who have a privileged relationship with Brussels - and a 'transnational public sphere', actors who interact with Brussels and have a privileged relationship with the 'European capital' (such as the Brussels based media). Finally, we can distinguish a weak public sphere, actors who do not interact directly with Brussels but who generate debate and form public opinion in other ways, for instance local media or excluded civil society groups. The research question that has been addressed in my field work refers to this categorisation, in so far it aimed at understanding the positioning and role of the Europe Direct relays in respect to the supranational political arena.

## **Networking EU's: the role of Europe Direct in constructing publication communication**

Europe Direct is a network developed in 2005 following a call by the European Commission for a proposal to reorganize the old system of relays run by Info Point Europe (IPE) and Carrefours. These two, since the end of the 1980s and 2004 respectively, have been the main actors at the local level. IPEs usually organised activities targeting the general public, whereas Carrefours generally focused on more specific targets, such as rural or agricultural groups.

It is not by chance that the initial idea to develop the EU's information centres was formed in the eighties, at the same time as the development of the 'Citizens' Europe' policies. The number of initiatives begun in the second half of the 1980s by the European Community to raise awareness of the European project is quite impressive: European awards, sports competitions, the formation of a European orchestra, the implementation of the Jean Monnet Programme and other exchange programmes such as Erasmus, Europe-wide celebrations like the 9th of May (date of the Schuman Declaration Celebration), projects to define Europe as a new cultural space such as the European City of Culture (Booth and Boyle, 1993, Hitters, 2000) and so on. The European space was thus to be conceived as a culturally and educationally mediated symbolic entity. Information relays were intended to help develop a social imaginary of the European public space.

The decision to re-organise the Information relays was taken in 2003, in order to consolidate the idea of decentralisation and to develop better communication management. A prominent new role has been assumed by the Representatives of the European Commission, who are responsible for coordinating the networks' activities. In the past, both IPE and Carrefours had a direct and often inefficient relationship with the DG Press and Communication. As I have discovered from interviews conducted over the last few years, in some cases there were no rules for organising information in Member States and the relays used to coordinate themselves.<sup>2</sup> The creation of the new Europe Direct structure -with a new formal role given to the Representatives of the Commission - is meant to develop better coordination between the different relays. The Representatives have been responsible for implementing Plan

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<sup>2</sup> In Italy, for example, IPEs have long been coordinated by the Turin relay which was informally responsible for giving minimum standards to the entire network

D at the territorial level and for establishing guidelines and principles on which the different activities should be based.

Europe Direct relays have two main functions. First, an 'informative function', meaning that they have to provide information on different European issues when requested by the public to do so. This is usually done in so called 'front-offices', but also through the new technologies (mainly web sites and electronic newsletter). Their second important – and more interesting – role, is to develop the so called communicative function. One of their tasks is to organize 'field events' and interactive or didactic activities with the public; and particularly with specific publics (mainly students at different stages of their education). This means that a very important educational role is played by the European relays. One of the aims of these activities is the development of an awareness of the European Integration process, focusing on the different historical events that have characterised it, on the leading political figures and the great debates going on in the EU (such as that on enlargement).

As public relations organisations, Europe Directs play the important role of mediators between the European Commission and the public; they have been designed to 'close the gap' between European institutions and social actors at subnational levels. What they can achieve day to day is limited, however, because they lack concrete opportunities to have a real impact by providing 'communicability' through their campaigning on European issues, both because of a lack of resources and of opportunities to concentrate the general public's attention on EU issues. Reducing the complexity of the different aspects of EU integration into communicable messages is in fact one of the most problematic issues and one of the biggest challenges in the everyday activities involving 'face-to-face' work with the public. Referring to a set of interviews with Europe Direct representatives and EU functionaries conducted face-to-face between 2005 and 2007, in the following section I suggest some reasons for the EU's continued institutional communication weakness, and some possible improvements.

## **From principles to practice: questioning the EU's 'institutional communication' reform**

The 'two flows of communication' structure was one of the main innovations Wallström announced when the process of the EU's redefinition of communication started in 2005. However, the adoption of an effective and substantial communication policy is still far from being realised. In this section I underline three aspects to which EU institutions should pay more attention in order to improve their institutional communication: the necessity to redefine relationships and interactions between actors, to better define subjects for communication, and to develop coherent feedback mechanisms.

By looking at the European Commission's structure it seems that communication should be improved both internally, between different DGs, and externally, between the DG Communication and others supranational actors communicating at the EU level. These include the European Parliament press offices and the various agencies who refer to Brussels and cooperate, more or less independently, in framing communication strategies, the Maastricht-based European Journalism Centre, for example, or the supranational media Euractiv. Supranational actors of course have the fundamental task of shaping agendas and drafting specific discourses on the European Integration process. They comprise what Eriksen (2004) has defined as the strong public sphere: those actors who have a direct and established relationship with the supranational institutions and are powerful enough to shape policy. This kind of public sphere is an elite – composed of intellectuals, professionals, functionaries - with a particular interest in European issues.

More challenging, however, is the task of improving the management of vertical communication: the relationships and interactions between the supranational, the national, and the local. Social actors at the bottom of the system of European governance represent the weak public sphere; they have few opportunities to gain a voice in the framing of European issues. Civil society actors working at the local level in member states, for example, need to ask experts working in umbrella organisations and operating at the supranational level to represent their interests within the EU's institutional setting, whenever they wish to include a European dimension in their activities.

Looking more specifically at the European Commission and vertical coordination, it is worth remembering that since 2004 the Commission Representatives in the member states have been given greater prominence in the organization of public communication in these states. They should be able to act as bridges between interests in the different territorial contexts and translate priorities decided in Brussels into communicable messages to be transmitted to the general public, through the Europe Direct networks. However, this process of communication management faces resistance from national governments, who do not want the Representatives of the Commission to gain so much influence over the shaping of institutional communication .

In fact, one of the most pressing current difficulties in proposing a coherent approach to communication is what a number of interviewees described as the ‘nationalisation’ of European issues by member states. Indeed, the EU’s ability to communicate depends more on the political will of national governments to facilitate such communication, than on the European Commission’s efforts to promote it. Much still also depends on the way in which the various national media report EU issues. The media re-contextualize the politics and themes of the EU through the prism of each member state’s political, social and cultural orientation and particular interest in Europe, questioning the European Commission’s attempts to develop a transnational public sphere. The lack of a shared commitment and a common strategy between different institutional and non-institutional actors, both at the supranational and national levels, seems to be undermining the ability of any EU communication to influence public opinion.

Representatives of Europe Direct’s relays recognise this as one of the main problems with the process attempting to redefine institutional policy. As one of them put it to me in a recent interview:

*There is a problem in the relationship with Brussels. The Plan D and all the different documents published in these last years address the problem of Communicating Europe, but the concrete meaning of this is not clear yet. The development of Europe Direct’s relays is positive and important for us and has helped us make steady progress in this policy area. But our problem is that our relationship with the EU just consists of a series of bureaucratic practices. (Interview n.8 in Italy, Europe Direct)*

So, the strategy behind the implementation of the institutional policy is not generally considered clear or well defined; it lacks a vision of the concrete aims, themes and priorities that need to be communicated. This can be interpreted as the result of the ‘European Commission’s schizophrenic approach to Communication’, to quote one of Europe Direct’s representatives, since the crisis of the European Union started with the failure of the referenda on the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands in 2005 and then flared up again when the Irish rejected the Lisbon Treaty in 2008. The term ‘schizophrenia’ refers to the use of institutional communication as a tool to solve the EU’s democratic deficit and to obtain consensus on European Policy making. It also expresses a clear opinion about the situation subsequent to the failure of the Constitutional Treaty, when the European Commission emphasized the importance of communication, but without backing this up with a clear, strategic, long-term plan.

As a representative of the European Commission explained during an interview in Brussels, these two referenda failures were a ‘rude awakening’ for supporters of the European project. The following quotation reveals the sense of confusion soon after the Constitutional Treaty ‘Nos’, and the subsequent decision to develop the Plan D:

*It does not really matter what people say because everyone is convinced that the Commission, the Brussels guys...always have a Plan B... but I can tell you that this was not the case, there was no Plan B but there was a need for a Plan D. The referenda results showed that there was a big gap between the political elites and their own citizens, so it was time for democracy, dialogue and debate. (interview n. 2 in Brussels, European Commission)*

The ‘big gap’ to fill through the improvement of communication has become a recurrent – and over-used - metaphor for the democratic deficit in many of the institutional discussions since 2005 on the overall mission of communication policy. A number of attempts to fill this gap have been initiated: funded projects, festivals and workshops across the member states, aimed at involving citizens in consultations and debates on various topics. These range from the role of the European

Institutions<sup>3</sup>, to European issues affecting citizens' lives<sup>4</sup>, and they usually seek to encourage discussion between politicians and target groups.<sup>5</sup> Even looking briefly at the various projects funded by the EU between 2005 and 2008, one must acknowledge the remarkable attempts made to enhance interactivity with a large set of audiences and targets.

A further criticism must, however, be made. This model is still intended to benefit the Commission itself, rather than to foster mutual understanding between institutions and the general public; the agenda chosen for debate is established on the basis of the EU's political priorities rather than on citizens' needs. Many Europe Direct representatives cite this top-down philosophy that shapes the agenda as one of the reasons for the continued asymmetry of the EU's institutional communication: its content is not balanced, and tends towards European Commission priorities.

This tallies with what has been remarked upon by various Civil Society and media Organisations based in Brussels. In 2006 Euractiv published a Yellow Paper on EU Communication entitled Euractiv's Plan D: Diversify, Decentralise, Disseminate, Decide (EurActiv 2006). The European Commission held discussions with civil society actors, media and policy makers between February and September 2006, following the publication of the White Paper on Communication. Euractiv's Plan D is based on feedback from, and consultations about, these discussions. In it, EurActiv found much to criticise and made various suggestions for improvement, pointing particularly to the philosophy behind the definition of this policy area, which still seemed to be too reliant on abstract principles and lacking a more substantial and well defined architecture. One basic criticism made in the Yellow Paper was of the White Paper on Communication itself: 'the analysis of issues is good, as well as the understanding of opportunities with civil society and the media. However, it does not constitute a full strategy: principles are conceptual rather than creating deep change, actions should be more specific, and the timeline is slow again' (Euractiv 2006: 5). The Active Citizenship Network followed the same line, criticizing the European Commission's strategy for not clarifying precisely 'what' to communicate,

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3 Like the project *Wir Sind Europa* in Vienna (A), focused on the European Parliament. For further information: [www.wirsindeuropa.at](http://www.wirsindeuropa.at)

4 One example is the *Festival Debate* organised in the Czech Republic, covering different themes like climate change or intercultural dialogue. For further information: [www.agora-ce.cz](http://www.agora-ce.cz)

5 The project *EU citizens on opportunities, challenges and the future of Europe*, in Slovenia until summer 2009, aimed to engage citizens in the EU debate through interactive approaches. For further information [www.mojasoseska.si](http://www.mojasoseska.si)

questioning the modalities through which European communication campaigns have been carried on, these being ‘often too general and focused on the European institutions’ interests and not the citizens’ interests’ (ACN 2006: 1).

This is a crucial point, at the root of the difficulties experienced trying to design relevant campaigns on European issues. It also emerged in some interviews with representatives of Europe Direct, as contrasts between the European Commission’s and general public’s needs emerge in their day-to-day work in local communities. On the one hand, the Commission has been asking for communication campaigns focused on very precise themes (such as the Constitutional Treaty, enlargement, the 2009 European Parliament elections) whereas, on the other hand, the general public often asks Europe Direct workers for information about very precise and concrete themes (structural funds, the environment, health, social protection, and others).

The following quotation is quite telling in this context:

*The kind of information and communication that the European Commission wants to establish does not correspond to the kind of information the citizens ask for, and this is one of the problems that creates an unsatisfactory situation. The citizens think that there is a lack of information, even that the information on Europe is often abounding. The problem is that the kind of information needed or wanted by the public is not available. (Interview n. 16 in Italy, Europe Direct)*

Europe Direct has the unpleasant task of mediating between the established priorities (of the European Commission) and the voiced needs (of the general public), thus reducing their capacity to work as a public relations office and to really support the strengthening of dialogue between the institutional and non-institutional realms.

To conclude this section, it is necessary to address one last ‘open question’, since the lack of mutual commitments between social actors, and the discrepancies between different ideas of what should be communicated, result from difficulties in using the feedback, collected by Europe Direct through ‘customer satisfaction’ measurement efficiently. This, as already mentioned, permits institutions to collect data on the general public’s priorities and to then adapt their communications accordingly. It is still not clear what the European Commission is doing with the various reports and policy recommendations that have been collected in recent years.

The overall impression, as the following quotation shows, is that inputs get lost when they reach the supranational level:

*We lack a feedback mechanism. We have been trying to discuss this with the European Institutions for a long time. This kind of information and communication is unidirectional and the opposite direction has not been developed yet. We have been standing at the bottom level: we listen, we promote, we try to communicate, collecting criticisms and instances which we send back to the Commission. But who gets them?. (Interview n. 15 in Italy, Europe Direct)*

The problems in organising data collected by different relays have been confirmed by the European Commissioners, who admit - for different reasons - that the mechanism is in need of improvement. One chronic problem seems to be the use of different methods of data-collection and, moreover, different processes to convey these formalised data to the institutions. An external body, or agency, has the task of summarizing the different reports sent to the supranational level and all the suggestions and ideas collected. Again, there is a widespread impression that what is being sent to the Commission is not really influencing their actions; that the opportunities to influence or redirect institutional activities are few and far between. 'It is really useless to start a process of critical listening if the product of this process does not reach the upper levels', as a Representative of the Commission in Italy admitted in an interview. The establishment of a coherent feedback mechanism could help to improve the efficiency of the model of institutional communication and enhance the development of symmetrical public relations. However, as already stated, this depends very much on the will expressed by the variety of actors who – at different levels of the European System of governance - constitute the complexity of European institutional communication.

## **Conclusion**

The development of a coherent and open system of institutional communication by the European Union is plausible and to be hoped for, in so far as it would allow the general public to engage in a dialogic and critical relationship with European institutions. However, some questions certainly remain open and call into question the feasibility of the European Commission strategy itself.

The structure of the communication policy is still top-down, even though this evaluation is widely rejected by the Commissioners themselves, who have often declared the need, in principle, to develop a policy based more on ‘citizens’ needs’ than on institutional interests. However, the framing of the agenda is still a matter for the strong and elitist Brussels-based public sphere and is very dependant on the balance of power between different institutional and non-institutional actors at the EU level. In general, the public rarely has a say in matters pertaining to European policies, even though the establishment of listening mechanisms for understanding customer response should be improving dialogue with supranational institutions. In this regard, I stressed that there is room for improvement in the use of feedback; its gathering should be more coherent and there should be more evidence that data collected from the general public reaches the supranational level and has an effect on EU policy making.

Because of their capacity to instigate direct face-to-face contacts, the Europe Direct networks have been seen as a means to improve the connections between institutions and the citizenry. Their creation is in line with the establishment of public relations offices in the member states, which are thought to provide and enhance the idea of ‘service communication’, a basic principle on which institutional activities should be based. However, to perform such a task effectively, the Europe Direct network needs the appropriate resources and its functions should be complemented by the establishment of a well defined policy, able to develop a shared commitment - between a wide set of institutional and non-institutional actors - to European communication.

I do not believe this can happen while the EU’s institutional communication is still based on rhetorical and ambiguous visions of the future of European Democracy and the idealistic view that communication is necessary for democratising the system. This overestimates the need for debate and dialogue on European issues, creating a situation in which the focus is on building consensus and legitimacy, and not on the genuine promotion of knowledge generated by open dialogue and effective listening to the voice of the public, even when this is critical and questioning of policy. Institutions communicating with citizens about questions of public concern can certainly strengthen the democratic bases of a political community. However, this should be part of a process consequent to the democratisation of the political community itself, not the prerequisite. In giving so much importance to

communication as a precondition for democracy, the Commission seems to be putting the cart before the horse. Its strategy is too focused on resolving the dilemmas afflicting the European project, rather than on gaining the necessary credibility to develop a commitment to Europe among its citizens. A serious overhaul of the ways of thinking about institutional communication, and a more realistic view of its functions, could certainly help to achieve an open model of bidirectional communication in the near future.

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